

# DRAFT

## CHAPTER 5:

## HISTORIC CONSERVATION + SUSTAINABILITY

### GOAL

Conserve and enhance the authentic, original qualities of the neighborhood, particularly its spatial patterns articulated by the critical elements of scale, density, lot coverage, and proportion as related to the tree-lined sidewalks, alleys, and streets.

### BACKGROUND

The Miller-Southside Neighborhood was subdivided for residential use in the 1920's and developed continuously to the present day. Consequently, the styles of houses range greatly from small brick ranches, large brick four squares, one and a half story bungalow's, two story colonials, Dutch revivals, Cape Cods, craftsmen, and Tudor cottages. Further, contemporary residences have been built as well; these structures carry forth the design diversity that is distinct to this neighborhood. Within the Miller-Southside Neighborhood is the Draper-Preston Historic District that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Despite such a temporal and consequently, stylistic diversity, the neighborhood maintains much effective continuity. This is achieved by respecting an overarching structure of organization, characterized by: building lots that are repetitive in size; typical, proportional lot coverage which does not exceed xx percent; detached garages oriented toward the back of the lot lending primary significance to the house's street presence; regularly maintained setbacks to establish a consistent scale relative to the street; narrow driveways at the street which do not interfere with sidewalk and street continuity; and mature trees that canopy the sidewalks to contribute to the pedestrian experience. Additionally, the majority of the houses are well constructed, capably detailed, and regularly maintained.

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## OPPORTUNITIES

- The neighborhood lies within walking distance to Blacksburg's civic, public, and commercial areas. The geographic location and neighborhood feel are often cited as the most preferred traits.
- The Miller-Southside neighborhood continues to be a very desirable place to live with a high percentage of owner occupied residences. These older homes are well constructed of high quality materials. ~~Houses usually sell quickly and fetch prices above market averages for the town.~~
- Older homes reflect a different mode of living and many owners desire to modernize the existing infrastructure by adding more bathrooms, larger kitchens, master bedrooms, and two car garages. Sustainable growth is important to prevent blight. Promoting innovative design that considerably interacts with traditional elements encourages sustainable growth.
- The alleyways are unique and are an important component of the spatial pattern of the neighborhood. They serve as a service road and an additional pedestrian and bicyclist path by which to traverse the neighborhood. Many garages are accessed via the alley, rather than from the street.
- The sidewalks contribute to the historic spatial conventions of the area, promote a positive pedestrian environment, and enhance safety.
- Most garages are detached, single-car shelters, shifted from the main building volume, often oriented to the back of the building lot. This organization results in clusters of individual structures in which the visual breaks between house volumes and garage volumes open up vistas. Narrow driveways at the street maintain sidewalk continuity. These details support a pleasant walking experience and maintain a healthy balance between buildings, cars, and pedestrians.
- Mature deciduous trees line the sidewalks and streets contributing in a positive way to the spatial structure of the neighborhood. The extant trees establish an aesthetic precedent by which to encourage future tree planting and tree replacement with large-scale trees along the street.
- There are still a handful of open lots for potential development or park space.
- There is significant authentic stylistic diversity in the house forms, as noted in the background section.
- Within the Miller-Southside Neighborhood, the Draper-Preston area has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Locally, there is an opportunity to designate this area as a Historic or Design Review Overlay District in order to offer protection from some of the aforementioned challenges threatening the neighborhood as a whole. Design review could include provisions regarding building materials, building orientation, building massing, volume, scale, style, continuity of facades, or any other criteria necessary to conserve features deemed significant to the historic status. An excerpt from the existing downtown Blacksburg Historic District Design Guidelines brochure provides an example of a reasonable starting point: "Changes to historic materials, features, spaces and spatial relationships need to retain a sense of wholeness of the district. In the presence of ongoing change, the distinction of the historic setting, including topography, vegetation, the original town grid and buildings, sustains the memory of an area through time."

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## CHALLENGES

- Encroachment from adjacent civic, community, professional, and commercial enterprises has resulted in conversion of single-family houses to accommodate other uses. Main Street houses are now almost exclusively professional offices and several houses adjacent to the University have been razed. Professional and commercial conversion is often irreversible as the house-cum-business is difficult to un-convert and, commensurately, the immediate locale has usually become undesirable, as the other “neighbors” are businesses. Additional problems associated with encroachment include parking difficulties and increased traffic. Encroachment is an ongoing threat at the boundary properties of this residential neighborhood.
- Older homes need maintenance and repair. There are no guarantees of high quality interventions over quick fixes and choices in refurbishing or replacing certain materials or elements impacts the original historic context. Further, there are no means by which to ensure that stylistic changes will not dramatically alter the scale or character of an existing house, particularly as it relates to the neighborhood’s street presence.
- Several recent renovation projects prompt four major concerns regarding such activity. First, additions of poor quality and lacking detailing—typically manifested as a box-like volume appended to a house, extended to the set-back line, clad in vinyl siding, and devoid of windows. Second, overbuilding the site, which often undermines the historic spatial relationship established between building mass and street. Relative scale is exceptionally important to conserve. Pop-ups and other additions that more than double existing square footage may meet town code yet fracture the established proportional lot coverage. Third, the concealment of the original, authentic building under heavy-handed intervention—houses are obscured by transformations that vary from stylistic modifications to total volumetric transformations. Fourth, the total demolition of houses to accommodate new, colossal constructions threatens to endanger the historic streetscape.
- The alleys are neglected and overgrown; there seems to be no regular maintenance. The gravel roadway is uneven from regular use by heavy garbage trucks. Many garbage cans remain in the alley throughout the week.
- The network of sidewalks is not evenly distributed through the Miller-Southside district. Heavy vehicular and pedestrian traffic and the proximity of the Beeks Elementary School suggest roads in immediate need of such supplemental infrastructure: Country Club, Airport, Southgate, and Draper extension. The construction of sidewalks is not a high priority for the town. Existing sidewalks are also in need of repair and maintenance.
- Many houses without garages have small lots. Variances to back- and side-yard setbacks may be required in order to accommodate and conserve a design vocabulary based on disengaged volumes and spatial flow.
- Deciduous, slow-growth trees are not being replaced in kind. Maintaining the integrity of the mature landscaping requires individual, voluntary compliance. Success is only likely through a very persistent educational campaign.

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- Any open space in an older neighborhood is highly valued and highly valuable. Many residents advocate developing empty lots as mini-parks or gardens, yet the commercial value of the land is a real impediment. Residents are further concerned that other Sylvan Croft, subdivision-within-a-subdivision, type development might occur. Sylvan Croft is poorly sited and has a “private” entrance street that shuns pedestrians and recreationists. The houses promise to be significantly out-of-scale relative to their lot size and certainly relative to the Miller-Southside neighborhood. The first house completed, 331 Airport Road, has 4273 S.F. of living area and a total gross floor area of 6181 S.F. sited on 0.4 acres. Residents seek to have earlier input on any future developments with an eye toward promoting sustainable growth that is guided by existing spatial patterns and layout.
- The Miller-Southside neighborhood has historic value more for the range of stylistic types as well as structures that are individually laudable as architectural, historical, archaeological, or cultural models. There is significant authentic stylistic diversity in the house forms, as noted in the background section.
- *[This paragraph may be reworded and placed in the opportunities section]* In the 1980's, the Draper-Preston area voted against a Historic District designation. Preservation guidelines were feared as being potentially too restrictive, perhaps overly sentimental. In light of recent building activity, the issue should be revisited. The overall question remains: which historic elements of the district should the neighborhood actively seek to conserve and via what system of oversight?

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## GENERAL POLICIES

- To conserve the historic neighborhood fabric while sustaining necessary alterations, renovations, and additions. The aggregate of structures indicate loose historic patterns that can serve as a guide for future actions throughout the whole Miller-Southside neighborhood.

## ACTION STRATEGIES

### Town Action Strategies

- Commit to regular maintenance for alleyways and sidewalks.

### Neighborhood Action Strategies

- The residents have clearly stated the desire to work with the town and developers on the planning stages of future development both in and adjacent to the neighborhood. Seek to establish a permanent neighborhood committee that can act as a standing professional advisory board and work to establish written guidelines oriented toward allowable usages or designs.
- Work on first step for designation of Historic District overlay: acquire signatures on petition of 51% of real property owners within the proposed district. Implicit with gathering the petition is ascertaining if a majority of the proposed district wishes to pursue the overlay.
- The alleyways and walkways are parts of the neighborhood that neighbors wish to revive and renew, work with the town and street engineering to correct and prevent the problems the large trucks are causing to the roadbed and landscaping. Work with town grants to install sidewalks.
- Investigate design of garbage can shelters intermittently placed along the alleys. Perhaps this could be financed via matching grants.
- Generate a pamphlet to guide property owners in developing sensitive design approaches that respect the built patterns of the district. Promote well-detailed additions, not necessarily similarly detailed but thoughtful and of high quality. Stress the neighborhood spatial patterns and suggest modern means by which to parallel them. There are many design “tricks” to lighten the effect of larger size additions; they should be employed.
- Continue neighborhood picnics to keep dialogue open between homeowners.